

JUDGE DEBORAH

Judge 4:1-24 (key verse 4:4)

"Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time."

Last week we saw how Israel had peace for 80 years under judge Ehud. However once Ehud died Israel went back to their evil ways. In today's passage, we are again going to learn about how merciful and gracious God is towards His covenant people. God yet again after the cry of Israel for help, raised Judge Deborah a woman Judge, a mother for Israel. Deborah led Israel through being a great source of encouragement for Barak, a military general, to trust and obey God. May we learn how we can conquer our paralysing fears and worries of this life, even when it is clear what God commands us to do.

Look at verse 1-3, "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, now that Ehud was dead. 2 So the Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. Sisera, the commander of his army, was based in Harosheth Haggoyim. 3 Because he had nine hundred chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly **oppressed the Israelites for twenty years, they cried to the Lord for help.**" Again Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord, it was not the first time, but after the death of every Judge that was raised, Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord. What does it mean that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord? It means with the full knowledge and experience of the grace and mercy of God, Israel did evil in God's eyes. And since God is omnipresent, he is in every area of our lives, whenever we choose to sin or commit evil, we are doing it in the eyes of God. However, in spite of their rebellion, insensitivity and sin before God. God started to orchestrate the events so that Israel would not live a comfortable life in sin, even before they started crying out for help. The Lord sold them into the hands of Jabin king of Canaan. He cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. We read in Judges 5:6-7, that in those days the roads were abandoned, travellers took to the winding paths and that Village life ceased. Wrong doing was rampant, it was no longer safe to walk the roads. Village life which symbolised hospitality and ubuntu spirit was no more. Basically, there was no peace. And it was only after the twenty years that Israel started to cry out to the Lord for help.

Israel committed sin over and over again, looking at Israel cry out for help, it was not a decision of repentance but rather, a cry to be relieved from the oppression of king Jabin. It took them 20 years to break from their pride and stubbornness and cry for help. They were not seeking a relationship with God. Rather God was like a vending machine, to grant them freedom to live whatever way they wanted to live. They did not learn much through the period of two judges (Othniel and Ehud) because there was no true repentance among them. And thus no repentance, no spiritual growth in the midst of hardships. That is why they kept being in a vicious cycle of being oppressed by other kings due to choosing the same evil ways. However, the oppression of Israel due to sin was heart-breaking to God. God then raised Deborah as a judge, a prophet the wife of Lappidoth to lead Israel [4]. Israel went up to her to have their disputes decided [5]. God this time around chose a woman. She was the best person for the job. There was no man who had spiritual insight and leadership. This shows that God can choose anyone to lead his people, young or old, man or woman. Also we should remember how God treats us in our fight against sin, and learn how to treat others in their sin problems.

Look at verse 6, "She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, **"The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you:** 'Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor.'" Barak lived in the far north Israel, in Kedesh of Naphtali. Which was allotted to the tribe of Naphtali and later became a city of refuge. Deborah as Judge and prophetess had a clear message from God for Barak. In fact it was a command from God, **"Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor"** the King James Version of the Bible suggests that it was not for the first time Barak was being commanded by the Lord to do this. It reads as follows, "Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun?" Deborah was asking Barak, has not the Lord already commanded you to do this? how come you are still here? How come you have not obeyed the Lord your God? Verse 7, is God's promise to Barak and his army, "I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands." God's promise was still awaiting Barak to obey God by taking the men up to mount Tabor. What Deborah said to Barak was also a confirmation that indeed the Lord has commanded him to go to mount Tabor with the men. Yet still Barak, in the midst of such clear command from God including God's promise failed to trust and obey. Let us look at verse 8 for Barak's response.

Look at verse 8, **"Barak said to her, "If you go with me, I will go; but if you don't go with me, I won't go."** Barak lacked courage and the will power to do what God had commanded. Even when God had given a promise that, he will grant Israel victory. What could be Barak's challenge or fear to trust God and obey? Barak was under the cruel oppression of King Jabin for 20 years. Barak as a military commander understood that, Sisera, commander of the armies of King Jabin had highly advanced military technology than that of Israel. They had 900 iron chariots while Israel had primitive military technology if any. Its like South Africa trying to go into war with The United States of America or with Russia. In fact we are even better because we not under any oppressive regime. I can safely assume that Barak was a man of calculations and did not see how they would overcome Sisera. He was a man who trusted more in human strength than in God's promise. That is why his will power got paralysed and could not have any conviction to obey God. In verse 8, Barak is not saying no, rather he has a conditional faith. He will only go if Deborah goes with him to mount Tabor. It was as though Barak's trust in God was through Deborah. Deborah became his re-assurance to trust in God. He had no doubt that Deborah was a prophet and that God was with her and using her.

Look at verse 9, "Certainly I will go with you," said Deborah. **"But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman."** So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh." There was a hash penalty on Barak due to the way he chose to obey God. The honour will go to a woman in their victory against Sisera. This did not bother Barak much, from here it seems Barak indeed wanted to obey God by all means as of first priority, yet just lacked the courage and will power. Because it did not matter that the honour will fall onto a woman and not him. His faith rose above selfish motive. He obeyed God's command for the glory of God and not his own. **He did it in obedience to God.** Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali, and ten thousand men went up under his command [10]. After Barak had summoned all his men at mount Tabor, Sisera was informed about this and he summoned from Harosheth Haggoyim to the Kishon River all his men and his nine hundred chariots fitted with iron [13].

Barak could see all the 900 iron chariots on the plains and instead of attacking remained at mount Tabor. The same happened to Judah when they were faced with Iron chariots. In Judges chapter 1:19 reads, "The Lord was with the men of Judah. They took possession of the hill country, but they were unable to drive out the people from the plains, because they had iron chariots." I think am safe to say, Israel had never defeated the armies with iron chariots. In fact they got paralysed by seeing the iron chariots. 10,000 men even though numerous, were completely useless against 900 iron chariots. Through Deborah, Barak had obeyed God to go to mount Tabor with all his men ready for battle. But now where it mattered most, Barak could not go down the hill to the plains. Going down to the hill to the plain was like complete suicide. It was complete foolishness. Barak was stuck at the mountain and had cold feet. Let us all read verse 14, "Then Deborah said to Barak, "Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" So Barak went down Mount Tabor, with ten thousand men following him." Deborah yet again encouraged Barak, **"Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?"** Barak could discern God's voice through Deborah and became convicted to make decision of faith.

Look at verse 15-16, "At Barak's advance, the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword, and Sisera got down from his chariot and fled on foot. 16 Barak pursued the chariots and army as far as Harosheth Haggoyim, and all Sisera's troops fell by the sword; not a man was left." It was only after Barak's advance that the Lord routed Sisera and all his chariots and army by the sword as promised. As long as Barak had remained up the hill, nothing happened on the plain. Sisera's troops continued to look strong and unbreakable. It was when Barak trusted in the promise of God, by going down the hill, that him and his men could experience the glory and power of God. God brought in rain and used the overflow of the river to sweep away Sisera and what belonged to him (5:21). Sisera and his troops had placed their trust in their strong horses and iron chariots. They had trusted in their human calculations and human strength. However, Barak through Deborah placed his trust in God's promise for victory. **By faith alone** they advanced towards what looked impossible and God granted them success according to His promise.

Look at verse 17, "Sisera, meanwhile, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there was an alliance between Jabin king of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite." Sisera had come against Israel in the name and confidence of the iron chariots, however Israel came to war by faith and in the name of the Lord. Jael invited Sisera into her tent with great hospitality, offered him milk when he was thirsty, covered him with a blanket and even gave him the assurance that he will be safe in her tent [18-20].

However, look at verse 21, "But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died." By killing Sisera, Jael broke the peaceful relation her husband had with king Jabin. She did this in order to have a relationship with the God of the nation of Israel. Meanwhile Israel had been violating the covenant with God because they wanted to keep relations with the Canaanites, Jael did the opposite. Jael disrupted, her peaceful worldly relations with the Canaanite king in order to gain a relationship with God. She could not have both worlds. As Deborah had prophesied, the honor of killing Sisera went to woman and not Barak. In the end Israel grew strong and the Jabin king of Canaan was destroyed [23-24].

Barak was a commander of Israel army, outwardly he looked like a courageous warrior, fearless and filled with courage and conviction to fight for Israel no matter the cost. However, as Deborah made it clear the command of God, Barak failed to accept God's command as it was but needed Deborah to go with him. Also, at the mountain top of Tabor, Barak remained there instead of going down the plain. Deborah could have wondered, how could the Lord choose a coward man like Barak? Did she hear the voice of God clearly, that it was Barak to lead the men into battle with Sisera? It was certain that she heard God's voice and she simply trusted in God's choice and God's plan even though not easy to understand. She believed clearly that victory in battle belonged to the Lord. Deborah could then be a great source of encouragement and mother for the nation of Israel. Even though it seems God's choice or leading is above our understanding, we must believe that He is with us, not against us and assures us of victory in our lives. Deborah demonstrated this very well.

When we look at ourselves, many of us can identify with Barak. Sometimes when I listen to our worship songs I feel ashamed and unable to sing them. God's commands are very clear to us in the Bible but we fail to obey many of them. Some are through our answered prayers. Many times we want God to first do his promise before we can trust. However, God does not work that way. We first have to fully trust Him and believe his promise, yet we find ourselves failing in certain areas of our lives. How can we fully obey God without coming with conditions for obedience? We need a Deborah. This person who can be our source of encouragement to trust in God's promises. Barak from the bottom of his heart wanted to obey God as of first priority. That is why it did not matter if honour did not come to him. His priorities seemed ok, however he could not trust and obey. Who is your Deborah when faced with decisions that require faith in God while the odds seem against you? Our fellow believers, shepherds

and missionaries can become our source of encouragement. Above all I believe Jesus Christ working through the Holy Spirit is our Deborah. I loved what one of the ministers by the name of Paul Washer said, "I survey my life and I see the countless failures and sins. I have only one hope that Jesus Christ shed His blood for my soul. He is my only consolation after all these years." Many times, I have behaved very cowardly more so prominently regarding marriage decision. This also includes cases when I had to defend the gospel around other professors at school, or when I choose to sin and live a comfortable life while we have missionaries and many servants of God around the world suffering for Jesus. My current lack of conviction for marriage while time is not waiting on me, yet there is so much to be done. This is all cowardice; I can really relate with Barak and I pray that Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit may convict me to make decisions of faith throughout my life. What Jesus did for me on the cross, is my source of encouragement to keep trying, to keep getting up when I have fallen, to keep crying out to God. I so pray that through Jesus, I may be a man of faith who makes decisions by faith.

In conclusion, this passage reveals the unconditional love of God over Israel. Though they keep sinning over and over again, God keeps saving them. We see God's loving hand over and over again, God does not get tired of turning us towards his grace and truth. We may have made a number of promises to God which we failed to keep, seeing ourselves falling into the same sin time and time and again when God's command and direction is very clear. This is all cowardice, Barak did not have many flaws, but had one flaw that mattered most. However, God used Deborah to release Barak from his cowardice and turn him into a man who trusts God and obeys. May we too be Christians who can be source of encouragement to others. I pray that we may repent and be encouraged by God's love for us, who has now sent the Holy Spirit working through Jesus to be our Deborah. May we find encouragement to trust and obey through the word of God through prayer. Amen.

